

***The Boys of Summer: My Life as a Closeted One Direction Fangirl***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

**by**

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## **Abstract**

In 2011, One Direction took the world by storm, reviving the boy band craze in the West; even after the band went on official hiatus in 2016, it's difficult to deny their influence on the music industry and British/American culture. Despite their popularity, the stigma of One Direction, One Direction fan culture, and the boy band genre is persistent. In a culture that fears both the exacerbation and lack of female sexual desire, the One Direction fangirl (or Directioner) faces shame and the pressure to suppress excitement and desire (at least, most of the time). Through her personal experiences as a closeted Directioner, a closeted asexual, and a budding writer, the author will reflect on present day fangirl culture, understanding how young girls are taught to think about femininity and analyzing our relationships with artists and celebrities. Through cultural criticism and creative nonfiction personal essays, the author will critique, praise, and remember her teenagehood with the lenses of sexuality, the roles of the artist and the audience, and what it means to be a woman.

## **Acknowledgments**

For my family, for Silas, and for the friends that continued to believe in this project from the beginning. For the passionate, intelligent Directioners and non-Directioners that have supported my ideas. For every person that listened when I didn't completely understand what I was saying at the time.

And for Louis Tomlinson, who always used to be my least favorite, but is the one I will love the most.

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## Process Analysis

Throughout my college career, I have focused primarily on fiction writing, both short stories and novels. Although I've naturally gravitate toward fiction, nonfiction has always orbited my interests. I've been interested in how research and journalism can affect and improve my fiction in inspiring new connections and potential threads, themes, and characters. In my fiction, research has heavily influenced things like setting, character voice, themes, and plot. For me, research was used for world building and making my characters believable, but rarely went further than that. As I've become more interested in creative nonfiction, though, I've been curious as to how a combination of research and fiction techniques can push me to see myself and American culture from a new perspective. Personal essays and creative nonfiction have been about understanding myself at different points in time; essays are about connecting myself to the world around me. So with the previous personal essays I've written for class, research has played a large role in developing core ideas about who I am and my beliefs; research establishes *me* as a character.

When I started conceptualizing this project, I knew that I wanted to, first, explore a genre I haven't thoroughly explored before, and, second, to write specifically about both larger cultural trends and my own personal experiences. I wanted research and exploration to go beyond setting and character believability; I wanted to use research to understand myself more. Particularly, I wanted to walk along the lines of writers like Emily Nussbaum, a television reviewer for *The New Yorker*; Nussbaum goes beyond reviewing shows in isolation, but provides thoughtful interrogations of the culture the show exists within, from millennial trends in *Riverdale* and *Buffy*



*the Vampire Slayer*, to feminism and *Big Little Lies*. In addition to Nussbaum's reviews, Meghan Daum's essay "Music is My Bag" was a large inspiration coming into this project. Daum combines elements of character development and construction with memoir and cultural critique in a way that was wholly new to me; in the essay, Daum constructs a specific (while simultaneously fictional) image of high school band culture through personal reflection. Her essay weaves back and forth between painting a larger cultural picture and honing in on her own specific, intimate experiences, seeing herself as a singular part, but also as a participant in a larger system. In addition, nonfiction writers like Nicole Chung, who explores race and femininity with bravery, and Claudia Rankine, who writes with lyricism and intentionality with structure, paved possible paths of exploring my own identity as a woman, and as a feminist.

With these topics, authors, and styles in consideration, I decided to pick genres and topics that would intersect all of these interests. I wanted to write these essays to analyze the relationship I've had with boy bands, why I love One Direction, and why I was so afraid of people knowing that this relationship existed. While my original intention was to write about multiple boy bands, I decided to focus on how my personal experience with One Direction has evolved at various points in my college career. I wanted to have a more formal inquiry (an essay, or series of essays) processing this relationship and how it's been tied to my understanding of femininity, intelligence, and ultimately feminism. I also knew that I wanted to explore my own sexuality through a topic (boy bands) that is all about female sexual desire; with current conversations surrounding sexual desire and empowerment, very little is said about it in relation to having a lack of sexual desire in the first place. One Direction and the boy band genre seemed

an organic topic to integrate all of these intersecting ideas, both feminism and fangirl culture, sexuality and memoir.

Ultimately I created hybrid cultural criticism/personal essays as the form for my thesis because I wanted this inquiry to feature my voice, story, and meditations as well as research and criticism. I naturally gravitated toward creative nonfiction essays, where I would be able to put emphasis on my voice as a narrator while simultaneously integrating a larger societal voice. These essays are meant to be an exploration of Western cultural attitudes toward female sexuality, the meaning of art and artists, and adulthood; but these revelations, connections, and inquiries would not have come to fruition without my intimate relationship with One Direction and Directioner fan culture. They are as much cultural criticism as they are personal coming-out and coming-of-age stories.

While writing these essays, I've realized I'm a naturally meditative writer and tend to write fluidly between topics and ideas rather than create one cohesive, straightforward narrative. I notice that when drafting I tend to focus on, first, identifying patterns and interesting people, questions, and events that connected all of my topics and ideas (boy bands, sexuality, and femininity). My revisions, though, tended to be focused on identifying why these patterns and why these connections mattered to me; revisions consisted of clarifying and concretizing conceptual ideas or areas that were confusing. Writers often joke that they revise more than they actually write, with good reason; the revision process has taken the most time during this project, but has also been the most essential. For both essays, going beyond the surface level connections and images to dig and try to understand what those connections actually mean has been the most challenging hurdle to overcome.



In “The Boys of Summer,” my original intentions for the essay were much too ambitious; my imagery and scenes (while stylistically matching what I intended) was highly conceptual and confusing. I envisioned the essay to be about the relationship between celebrity and audience, particularly male celebrities and a female-dominated audience. I wanted to understand why people—and in this case, young women—are so attached to the idea of celebrities, where critiques of fangirls come from, and why I felt so conflicted identifying with that group of people. The essay would weave my thoughts about sexuality and shame into the narrative, but would be used more as a lens to think about how boy bands and celebrities are marketed toward young women.

The more I wrote, though, the more I realized what I really wanted to write about was sexuality. Out of sixteen pages, about half of the original essay was cut and replaced; looking back, I realize that I was attempting to integrate two separate ideas that were (loosely) related and trying to make them work as a whole. Over the next three developmental revisions, I began to focus most of my questions and inquiries on the shame of sexuality in relation to One Direction fan culture, rather than attempting to inquire both fangirls *and* the band as an entity. These questions then transformed into questions about asexuality and why it has affected my connection and involvement to One Direction fan culture; in the revision process of “The Boys of Summer,” my narrative became more about seeing how the feminine double standard is actualized and how it has influenced my identity as a woman.

I seemed to have relatively different challenges while writing “Requiem for a Louis.” Whereas drafting “The Boys of Summer” came naturally (and the difficulty came with revisions), the difficulty with “Requiem for a Louis” came first with drafting the essay. After

focusing on One Direction fan culture in “The Boys of Summer,” I knew that I wanted to write something that focused more on the actual band members. Whereas “The Boys of Summer” could be categorized more as a personal essay, I knew I wanted the next essay to be more of a profile. I originally envisioned a more journalistic essay that removed most of my personal voice from the narrative; the essay would be about the exploitation of these boys’ bodies for the pleasure of young women, and how boy bands receive similar prejudice and stigma because of their association with femininity.

I decided to write about Louis Tomlinson, the band member I least liked and the band member who fascinates me the most; still, I wasn’t exactly sure what I wanted to say *about* Louis. I wanted to go beyond biographical information, but writing a more in-depth profile was (obviously) constrained by the fact that I couldn’t interview Louis myself. My essay would have to rely on news reports and other interviews that Louis had done in order for me to draw a more interesting narrative. Taking the time to research articles and to seek a story just from Louis’ superficial public image affected the drafting process significantly for me. After compiling the information and scenes I wanted to use, revising the essay to create a more cohesive and compelling narrative came more organically; after three developmental revisions, the essay began to focus more on what it means to be an artist and the risks artists take when it comes to success and failure.

When I set out to write both of these essays, I did not truly understand what I was trying to say. I could see potential paths and where the essays might lead me, but they naturally steered into different directions. Perhaps, then, the physical act of writing is the active process of discovery. In the past, I’ve always perceived writers as people who have something to say and



use prose as the medium to say it. Perhaps there are writers like this, but for me, I write *because* I don't understand; my questions and inquiries are explored not before I physically write, but through the act of writing. If anything, I'd like to think these essays are a reflection of my actual process of discovery and realization, and are not just snapshots of who I am currently but *why* and *how* I come to certain conclusions. I've always seen writing as a form of control, but as I gain more experience as a writer, I've become less attached to that idea. I can only hope that my writing will continue to surprise me, change my mind, force me to grow, and force me to dig further into myself.

Ultimately, I want these essays to be seen by an audience curious about the way pop and mainstream culture intersect with the academic. While the essays are largely personal, my hope is to have them be shared, rather than keep them private. Ideally, I'd like to imagine these essays as a part of a future series or book of essays; I hope to continue exploring and diving into pop culture, constructions of femininity, and childhood that will accompany "The Boys of Summer" and "Requiem for a Louis," going beyond just boy bands and fan culture. While the subject matter and emotional appeal might be more widely effective and popular through online feminist magazines, one of my goals is to have these essays access literary audiences that might not consider the subject matter to be "serious" or worthwhile. Despite my long term vision for this project, I'm not sure what I'll do next with the essays; I might submit one or both of the essays to literary magazines or online feminist collectives, or perhaps wait to develop more essays and then seek representation. I know, though, that my opinions might change, and I'll have no idea what the essays will look like in the future. I do know that these essays will remain open-ended, and that the submitted pieces for this thesis will, while finished for now, always be works in



progress. However they'll look, I know I'll continue to write them with as much honesty I can muster, and they will be as close to a mirror as I can make them.

## The Boys of Summer

The book is thin, smooth like glass. The pages are thick and shiny, like teenie bopper magazines, but better quality. The cover: glossy, hard to bend. A white background, the title embossed.

A spread of five boys: the era of One Direction is blazing across America, from sea to shining sea. Pants pressed neatly and jackets that matched, but didn't match too much -- just enough that everything was still aesthetically pleasing, reds, whites, grays, blacks, style ranging from preppy to sporty to edgy.

My mom gave me the book on Christmas, and I took it upstairs to my room to hide it on my bookshelf, in between my classics (the books I read for class) and my little kid books (my *Magic Treehouse* series and *Chasing the Falconers*). My mother was a little upset, or at least she was surprised that I was so angry that she had given it to me.

"I don't understand—I thought you liked One Direction?"

"No. When did I tell you that?" If you asked my mother, she'd tell you I was a defensive child and that I was always angry at her for something.

I don't remember being defensive; I remember feeling that I needed to hide all the things I was ashamed of, like most kids think they have to when they're fifteen.

I slid the book under a stack of *Seventeen* magazines, at the bottom of the pile. Even when I was alone I never even cracked the cover open. I wasn't afraid of the book; I was afraid of *wanting* to open the book, and the shame of any kind of desire for them was enough to push me away.

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August 2011: One Direction's first single, "What Makes You Beautiful," is released. It's their first song coming out of Britain's *X-Factor*. The song came up as a recommended video on YouTube. I remembered the name (One Direction) from some magazine article predicting that they were going to start the next British Invasion.

At the beginning of that season, Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson, Liam Payne, Zayn Malik, and Niall Horan audition as solo artists and are cut before the judges' house rounds. The boys are devastated: for Liam, this is his *second* time auditioning for the *X-Factor*, almost making it to the judges' house rounds, and getting cut as a solo artist. Simon Cowell, though, saves them and brings the boys together to compete as a band in the group category.

By the end of the season, One Direction wins third place, but they're the ones who end up taking the world by storm. I don't even know who actually won, or who was the runner up. What I do know about the finale: Harry Styles whispers something into the winner's ears, something about pussy cats. It's never released exactly what he says, but that doesn't stop us from speculating what he said and what it means: Something about women? Was he actually talking about cats? Some inside joke that was too dirty to ever be released? It becomes a meme. Harry Styles is now the pussy cat man. Fans shower him with cat related items, cat photos, cat drawings of him and the band. Crude jokes about vaginas, because Harry is the lady killer of the group.

In the music video for “What Makes You Beautiful,” the camera opens on a beach, probably in California, because it feels like all teen music videos are set on a beach in California. The sun is just about to rise and the boys are wearing short sleeves and rolled up capris, because all teen music videos take place in the daylight where the summer air meets the clean feeling of water. The first time I watched the video, I could feel the summer breeze. I’d never been to California before, but I could imagine what it would feel like to be there.

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When I think about being a teenager, I think about the lack of men I’ve had in my life. My mother was my closest family member. Most of the teachers I looked up to were women. The peers I interacted with most were from my girl scout troop, or choir and drama club (dominated by women). Most of my role models were women: Kristi Yamaguchi and Idina Menzel, Mary Pope Osborne and Shannon Hale and Sarah Dessen, Hermione Granger and Annabeth Chase, Elphaba and Glinda, Belle and Jasmine and Mulan. The spaces I inhabited were usually made by women, or at least *for* women, or at least outnumbered men entirely.

And so the questions started when I was a teenager: So... there’s no one? Not even someone you’re interested in? Are you seeing anyone? What about Griffin? What about Will? What about your dance partner? What about Andy? Is there anything we should *know* . . . about you?

I did think it was strange that there hadn’t been anything remotely sexual in my life. I had crushes, but they all felt tame. When I talked about my crushes, it was always about how their



eyes and hair looked nice, how they did really well in quiz bowl, or that the shape of their nose was aesthetically pleasing. Their clothes didn't look like they'd been picked out by their mother or that had been laying in a pool of sweat in their locker. I was actually interested in talking to them about books and music and anything not sports related.

I think I realized I talked differently about my crushes than other people did at the beginning of high school. My friends couldn't *stop* talking, couldn't *stop* thinking, about their crushes; it was like they were bursting from the seams. I was supposed to *daydream* about someone's eyes and hair. It wasn't *just* thinking your crush's clothes looked nice: I was supposed to *love* his clothes. I had to feel like screaming every time his name was mentioned on the announcements if he did well in quiz bowl. If you liked a boy, you were supposed to think that his nose was crafted by the Greek gods themselves. And that all of these things combined were supposed to make you feel like attaching yourself to that person and touching everything you loved about him. And I didn't feel that way about *anyone*. I couldn't even bring myself to imagine what that kind of attraction with someone real would actually be like.

I'd deny my family's questions, brush them off with a *I don't have time to think about boys* or *No, I just don't think I know anyone mature enough*. Or sometimes just a *no, no, no*. And no one would push me any further, since my sex ed teachers and mother and aunts and troop leaders said a girl my age didn't need to be thinking about boys. A girl my age has too many other things to think about, and all the girls in romantic teen comedies get so distracted by boys that their whole lives are derailed. There's a fucking reality show about pregnant underage girls. *Gilmore Girls* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* and *Juno* are literally about how girls' lives get fucked when they're too involved with boys. There was no way in hell I was



going to end up like them. I was too busy figuring out what I was going to do with my life. A girl my age had plenty of time to figure boys out.

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If you ask me, the video diaries are what made One Direction who they are. One Direction's music isn't a revelatory departure from the bubble gum pop dominating the charts in the late 2000s. And it's not like the boys themselves filled some gap in the market for music for teenage girls; because the thing is, One Direction is not a departure from the boy bands that have come before. The boys are cute. The music is catchy and upbeat. The songs address young girls directly; it's clear who the boys *want* the audience to be.

But the video diaries made One Direction different: they proved that the boys were human. The diaries weren't like formal talk show interviews or radio shows or the quizzes in magazines. The diaries felt unsupervised, uncut, raw, and were made by the band (or at least made to look like they were made by the band). Sarcastic and a little crude, jokes about pigeons and bits where they're pulling onesies over their heads. Answers to fan questions that aren't actually answers, but turn into jokes online, keywords and catchphrases that only the fans use on Tumblr and under the pictures on the boys' Instagram posts.

My favorite diary: posted February 1st, 2012. The boys are sitting in what looks like an empty movie theater, or an empty concert venue. Niall begins closing the video, going through the motions (thanking the fans, telling them how sad they all are that this is their last video diary for a while, expressing how excited they are to meet their American fans on tour). In the row

behind him, Zayn pulls out a water bottle with what looks like orange Gatorade and takes a gulp. He jerks forward, flails about, the whites of his eyes rolling up, and he throws the bottle to Liam. Liam picks it up, gives a little hoot, takes a gulp too, and jitters in his seat, passing the bottle to Harry, and so on. By the time Niall turns around, they're all dancing and thrashing in their seats, screaming about energy juice.

I watched this video entranced, over and over again into the late hours of the night; sometimes I'd go to bed with the video playing, and fall asleep to the sound of their voices. It was the raw joy they exhibited that pulled me in. I wanted to be there with them. I wanted to feel that happy and joyful. I studied every movement, every moment, thinking about the way their laughter rang throughout the theater and the way their eyes slid to each other, and then to me. I wondered what it would take to recreate that. How I could recreate that feeling in real life, with someone real. It was a combination of joy and admiration, and yes, of thinking they were cute as hell. If I had that kind of connection with someone who didn't know me and who I didn't know, then surely that kind of connection in real life would be world changing. I wanted joy and connection and happiness, and from what I understood about love, that video was what it was about. Joy and friendship and an attraction that transcended all other human experiences.

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I didn't tell anyone that I was a Directioner in high school . All my fan research was done in secret. Facebook was too public, and so was Tumblr. Pinterest was easier to hide because I didn't actually have to publicly follow any accounts.

A typical Directioner Pinterest fan board: hundreds upon thousands of professional photoshoots with the boys, individual shots, group shots, artsy shots, stills from music videos, screenshots of Youtube videos. Links of them spontaneously singing the “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” theme song during an interview. Fan photos, taken by the lucky ones that knew what hotel the boys were staying at. Pictures the boys posted on Instagram.

Fan theories about Larry: a conspiracy that Louis and Harry (i.e. Larry) were secretly in a relationship, using their girlfriends and lovers as beards for the public. The theory went so far that a few years ago (when Louis’ baby was born), fans set out to prove that the baby didn’t exist, and that the photo Louis posted on Instagram was photoshopped. Louis was lying about his baby to convince the fans that he was straight. Yes, “Babygate” was a thing.

When I look at the high school Pinterest boards I saved in secret, it’s like trying to stare directly into the sun; everything is so excessive and dramatic that I can’t look at it too long before I close out. In high school, I didn’t tell anyone that I was a Directioner because there must have been something wrong with me that I wanted to be a part of this fan group. Other Directioners wore, and wear, the label with pride despite the element of shame that came along with it. There were, and are, so many proud people. But girls like me aren’t supposed to like One Direction.

Girls like me with stringy hair and stringy legs. Girls brace-faced with transition lens glasses hiding the fact that they didn’t have that cute “All-American Girl” kind of pretty that Disney movies like to push. Girls like me, who were at least on the honors track (so they have *something* going for them), accelerated courses from fourth grade and on, all serious and



studious. So the kinder way of saying “You’re not pretty enough to worry about boys coming to you,” was “Well, a girl your age has other more important things to worry about.”

When it’s easy to associate self worth to others’ attraction to you, it’s hard to ignore that you don’t get the classic stares the tall pale girls would get. I was suddenly waking up to find that all the acquaintances that I knew had been talking to boys since middle school, and what do you mean you’ve never been asked out on a date before? And so when self worth is tied to physical attraction, what do you do for the girls like me? In early 2000s Disney Channel movies, like *Zenon*, *Motocrossed*, and *Cadet Kelly* and *Read it and Weep*, they’re the “smart” girls. For the girls who could never see themselves as the Disney-kind-of-pretty girls, they made movies about “nerdy” and “smart” girls who “didn’t fit” the mold, who “stood out” and were “unconventional” (but never “unconventional” or “ugly” enough to actually be outrageously unconventional or ugly). Girls like Gabriella in *High School Musical* who were “ambitious” and “smart” never succumbed to the traps of American capitalism. Girls like Gabriella who lived on the fringes. They liked being different. Or at least, by the end of the movie, before the credits rolled, they would always discover the value of being different, and that all the time they spent trying to be like the rest of the “pretty” girls at school was wasted, when they could have just been spending time being themselves. And they still got good grades, starred in the school musical, and *still* got to make out with Zac Efron. That was always the message. Don’t worry about boys because you have more important things to worry about. And the boys never looked my way, which I never minded.

What do you do when you don’t look like the girl in that One Direction music video? The one who’s leggy with hair that’s silky in the right way, and not in the way that sticks to the back

of your neck during the dead of Indiana summer. You're told that the pretty girls aren't girls you want to be like; those girls are sluts, sex-crazed, boy-obsessed maniacs. I wanted to feel *superior*. Girls who were boy crazy were stupid. They were overly emotional. And they could be so much more than crazy fangirls; they should have greater aspirations, and have dreams with more substance. Even though there are all of these things saying that you should look like this, and look like that, and not care about what boys think of you and to not want boys, you *don't* have to care about that. You don't. Really, truly, it's fine if you don't want to be in a relationship right now. That's normal and healthy. How fucking awesome is it that I got to live in the beginning of the age where girls get to be more than pretty faces and leggy models. Be like Gabriella; I didn't, shouldn't, have to worry about boys. I didn't, shouldn't, because it would have been impossible to attain anyway.

And what do you do when the non-pretty girls start calling the pretty girls sluts? They'll say that the non-pretty girls just don't understand. Those uptight, snotty, anti-feminist virgins can't possibly be living their lives to their full potential because they live without passion, an urgency for life and connection and love. There's a scene in the TV show, *Jane the Virgin*, where Jane's fiction writing professor confesses she's bored with Jane's romance novel. It's flat; there's some element that's missing from it. When Jane mentions she's a virgin, everything makes sense. The romance novel is dead from the beginning because Jane has never had sex. Those virgins are flat without love, and their lives are loveless because they don't have sex. Purity is sexist. Purity is a myth. And who'd want to be pure when you can be full with joy and pleasure?

And so here are the talking points that teenage Natali took from One Direction and all these movies and shows. On one hand, being a girl inherently meant wanting to want sex and



romance; or at least everyone around me (my parents, my teachers, the media I consumed) assumed that all girls wanted sex and romance. But wanting sex and romance was inherently bad; so girls by nature were bad. So being a *good* girl meant overcoming the desire to want sex and romance. And overcoming the desire to want boys should be difficult, but it is something that had to be done. Simultaneously, overcoming desire also meant that you were missing a part of life that you were *supposed* to be experiencing. Sex was, could be, *amazing*. *Don't* suppress it. Essentially; every fucking thing you could possibly want is the wrong thing to want.

I didn't tell anyone I was a Directioner *not* because I was ashamed of the way that One Direction made me feel, but that they made me feel anything at all. Don't be like Lorelai or Juno or Amy: girls shouldn't think about boys when they're that young. At least, they shouldn't want to talk about wanting to think about boys, and that it's dangerous if they think about boys because boys will fucking derail your life when you get pregnant. But it's expected that girls will want "it"; because even though Gabriella is brilliant and can do anything, anywhere, she's still a girl, and you can't blame her for falling for Zac Efron, what with her weak, emotional womanly spine and all. It's expected that women want "it," even though that's *wrong* (because they just can't control sexual desire, it's in their nature). The systems of capitalism and sexism and the exploitation of female sexuality had successfully trapped me, and that I was just another dumb, stupid, sex-crazed girl. I had also failed at being above all the hormones and trials of youth. Even though what I felt had nothing to do with sex, it still felt wrong to *want* to feel that way about boys.

I didn't tell anyone I was a Directioner because there was something wrong with me because I *couldn't* want. It was like I had skipped something; I was the DVD of a movie you've never seen that always jumps over the first twenty minutes. And then for the rest of the movie you kind of understand what's happening in the story, but you can't really enjoy the movie because you're still missing the first few scenes. The whole movie is ruined because you could be missing out on the best part of the story; you'll never understand what makes this movie so great. Because you haven't seen the first twenty minutes.

I was doing something right not wanting to like One Direction. And I was doing something right not wanting to want anyone, in romantic or sexual ways. And that was terrifying, because if being a girl meant wanting to want boys and men, then what did that make me? If I was missing a scene, the story is not longer a story; the DVD is broken. Did that mean I was broken too? But is there a part of the female experience that I was missing; and if I was missing it, did that mean that I wasn't a girl and that I could never become a woman? Two camps of thought: to be a good woman you had to be sexless. To be a good woman you had to have sex. Which was it? Or was it neither? Or maybe the key was in tricking everyone that you were both: Madonna *and* whore at the same time for the right people at the right time.

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My favorite posts on my secret One Direction Pinterest boards were always the Imagines. Sometimes I could find whole boards devoted to them, and I would waste time pretending to do homework reading hundreds of them.

Imagines: always written in the second person, as if the reader is the one experiencing the scene. An imaginary, desired scenario and story with the band member of your choice.

Sometimes in the Imagine's universe, the band member is still actually in the band. Sometimes in the universe, the boys aren't in the band, but are imagined as people you go to school with, or met in a coffee shop or grocery shopping. Imagines are different from fan fiction in that the subject of the story is always the reader. The Imagines don't even name their main characters: "YN" stands for "your name." As in, when a character calls out to "YN," the reader is invited to imagine that it is *their* name being called.

When I was a teenager, I would close my eyes and see the world I wanted to be in, the life I should be living. In the most cliché way possible: the sun is shining, and there's someone beside me. That there's someone I could even imagine wanting so much it'd set the world on fire. Being a girl, being a fangirl, and being a Directioner meant that I had to want to eat boys whole: that I wanted their bodies and their minds, to feed a flame of desire inside of me that craved emotion and sex. And ultimately, it never mattered which boy the Imagine focused on: I was attracted to attraction, that there was a feeling and a visceral experience out there in the world that could make my head spin so fast and my stomach flip over and under. That you could get that feeling just by looking at someone cute, and it was supposed to feel like your whole body was on fire. I tried to imagine what that kind of desire would feel like in real life and if it was even possible. That the two, sex and emotional attachment, when intertwined made this whole other human experience that transcended individuality. That when you experienced that transcendence, you became someone new.



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If you had asked me where I saw myself, relationship-wise, by the time I was graduating college, I would have imagined that I'd met at least *one* person that I'd even *consider* being in a relationship with. Had spent nights on fruitless dates and on boys not worth my time. Had stories of men brushed off the shoulder and of sex disasters. What my friends now talk about. What I'm fascinated hearing about and pretend to commiserate with like I understand what they're going through.

And so here are the devastating secrets that shouldn't be devastating, but for some reason are: I have never had sex. I have never had a partner. I have never kissed or been kissed, held or been held.

And here are the devastating secrets that still seem like they're supposed to stay secrets: I don't think I've ever wanted to have sex. Maybe. I'm not sure what sexual attraction to another person is supposed to feel like.

Imagining what it's supposed to feel like is easy. I am an emotional person; I care and I feel deeply. When I imagine what a partnership would be like, that emotional connection is visceral and real. But when I think about the way I've thought about sex, I realize that I've never wanted sex. I've just been missing the first twenty minutes and trying to make up what I *think* should be happening, logically trying to understand what comes next if I didn't see the first part. The way I've thought about sex is how PG-13 movies show sex: one minute the couple is passionately making out, maybe taking off their clothes, but the sex itself is never shown, and the next thing the audience sees is the couple lying naked in bed, talking about life, love, and the

next plot point of the story. Sex is a means to the end, a necessary act to connect the two characters together, but something the audience doesn't necessarily wants to see performed act by act. It's the after that's interesting; that's where revelations and redemptions and jealousy and love and hate happen. But to get to the after, you have to have the before and the middle. The movie might skip over the middle, but that doesn't mean that the middle doesn't exist.

I've always been told that *real* romantic love is intrinsically tied to sex, so if I wanted love and romance, then sex was inevitable. You can't understand the movie, the book, the story if you don't have the whole picture. You can't understand the movie without all the parts together. So when I saw photos of Zayn and Liam and Louis with their girlfriends and felt my gut wrench because they (the girls and the boys) knew something that I didn't understand, I thought it was that I was missing the sex and the desire. Step from attraction to sex to love, in that order. I *couldn't* be capable of love, because I had never wanted sex for sex's sake. And I hadn't yet realized that those are two different questions (wanting love and wanting sex). Imagining what sex would be like and actually wanting sex in real life with someone real are not the same, I suppose.

So I'm afraid of saying I'm asexual, because I don't know if I can tie my future self to the idea that I'll never want to have sex *at all*. And I'm also afraid if I admit I'm asexual, I'm also admitting to the fact that I'll never be able to connect with or understand other people completely, wholly, fully. Or that I'm confused about what sexual attraction really is; that not wanting to have sex with *real people* is different from not wanting to have sex *at all*, and if that makes it more of a personal problem then one to do with sexuality.



My mother tells me that it's just because I haven't met the right person yet. All of this will click when I meet the right person:

This is the point where I'm supposed to freak out about dying alone because I don't plan on gaining any sexual experience anytime soon, and I guess that means men won't ever want me. And here are the things I'm most terrified of: I'm not scared. Really. There are so many more things I'm worried about. What if I never get to do anything of meaning with my life? What if I ruin every friendship I make? What if my existence is doing more harm than good? What if I make some horrible mistake and I die and I can't explain myself for whatever I did and I'm hated for the rest of eternity?

And what if I never fall in love with another person? What if I never experience the kind of love (emotional, mental, spiritual) ever? I'm not scared that I'll never have sex. I'm scared that by not experiencing a relationship that both intertwines sex and emotional attachment, that I'm missing some essential link in understanding other women and connecting with other men and being okay with myself; what if I'm missing out on something? What if I'd become a better person with that kind of love? If I'm stuck not understanding the first part of the movie, what's the point in making it to the end? I'm a liar and a cheat and I'm faking my way through all of this, because I can't ever experience the world the way I'm supposed to.

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There's a whole scandalous corner of One Direction Imagines and fanfiction that is basically porn. Imagines *without* sex are vivid and intimate and explosive; I can feel my skin

tingling and I want the smooth backs of my hands to be touched. Imagines *with* sex are also vivid and intimate and explosive; colorful language, details about what goes where, when to touch what, the way each body contorts and bends around each other. The names and faces disappear, almost. It's like you forget who the Imagine is being written about because I guess you're supposed to lose yourself in good sex, or that's what I've read. The words are dirty and beautiful.

The problem is that all Imagines are about fantasy. I think the majority of Directioners know and understand that. But it's the fact that this possibility exists in the world. That it's a dream that we can wish for. The act of wishing and wanting is powerful. Even when you know the Imagine isn't going to come true.

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Can a woman be a woman if she experiences desire, and can a woman be a good woman if she overcomes desire, and can a woman become a bad woman if she never can overcome it? Can a woman be a woman if she's lived without desire? Can a woman be a woman if she wants desire, even though she knows she shouldn't want it?

Even if I know that in some ways I'll never understand what sexual attraction is, is it okay that I *want* to understand how it feels? Is it okay if I'm afraid that I'll never understand how it feels? Will I ever be fulfilled if I never understand how it feels? I want to say that it doesn't matter. But the way people talk about how sexual *and* emotional attraction and love work together makes me feel empty.

What I've come to understand is that, to many, I am someone to be feared, because a woman can't be controlled by her desire to have sex if she has no desire whatsoever. She's cold and detached. She doesn't want sex, and so the purity and emptiness of her vagina is not a sign of hard work and achievement, but an indicator today of all the links missing. She's cold because she missed the first twenty minutes of the movie, minutes you can never get back. Other women are broken in the process, lost when they give into desire, but she's broken from the start because she has no desire to rectify.

So she has too much power and too much knowledge about what life devoid of sex is like, and therefore a life devoid of men. Her emptiness begets power. Power begets coldness. And the cold wakes her up from the inside out, because there's nothing inside waiting to stop it. I've circled around these questions because I used to think they were the most important questions for me to answer if I wanted to truly understand femininity. But answers to *those* questions are no longer defining. Because the simple answer is that no, they don't define femininity, or ability to feel and ability to live with passion and fervor, and that the life I live and the choices I've made are proof of that.

What matters is that I'll never be able to answer and act on these questions the way that I want to. But I'll gladly take emptiness over dead sex any day.

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An imagine for One Direction: You're sitting with a girl who doesn't realize she's falling out of love with you because she hasn't realized yet that she doesn't really know what love or attraction or sex is yet. She says to you,

*What's scary is that I can't tell the difference between you and the image that you're putting out. If everything about you is supposed to be marketable, then where do you begin and where do you end?*

*What I imagine myself to be: someone smart, someone kind. Someone who cares about other people. Someone who embraces the want to want. Someone liberated and free. Someone who loves deeply and understands what love with another person is supposed to be like, emotional, sexual, romantic. And by knowing what that kind of love is and feels like, someone who becomes a better person and a better woman for my friends. The bond women have with one another is one that you can't ever recreate.*

*I don't know how that translates to what I actually am. The image of what I wish I could be and what I actually think I am is murky. The image of what I wish I could be is something that I truly don't believe I'll ever understand or experience. But at some point, the relationship you have with an image can't last forever, because that's not how images work.*

*The relationship that I have with you, YN, is based on my understanding of the things that you want me to see, and what I want you to see of me. You want me to see a potential. You want me to see what I could be with love and sex and boys; I can feel transcendent, above all the other girls who haven't had love and sex and boys yet. I want you to see someone who can experience*

*that transcendence with you, and together we can make something so joyous and gorgeous it sets the world on fire. I want you to see a girl who is, in the most cliché ways possible, normal.*

*But I don't think that's how relationships work. I think relationships are about peeling back the images. That's why this was always meant to end. That's why every relationship we have with celebrities is created to end. That's why our relationship with images is created to end.*

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2016: the beginning of the end. Zayn Malik left the band in 2015, and the remaining members of One Direction officially announce their plans to go on hiatus a year later. People go missing from my classes to mourn, but when I hear the news I don't feel anything. No one can predict when or how we fall out of love; I guess it just happens when we're moving through time and we realize that we've changed and *it* has changed too. And you don't realize it at first, but it slips away when you're not looking. But sooner or later, one day you wake up and you don't feel anything for that person at all.

2016: the year of the beginning of the end, and the beginning of the beginning again. Simon Cowell pulls five boys (four American, one Canadian) together to form PRETTYMUCH. Each boy had been working under Syco Music until Cowell merged them into one. They're distinctly reminiscent of the 90s boy band era, repetitive and pedantic, romantically nostalgic. I hate them. I've already watched their first music video, like, 20 times and I hate them. I hate how choreographed their choreography is; every fake mistake, every playful "spontaneous" movement, every "random" flirtatious involvement of a prop. Everything is too sharp and too

distinctly millennial. It's not the same. It's all trying too hard. There's nothing raw or real about their movements, their Instagram posts, their vlogs. They're nothing like One Direction.

And, I guess, everything like One Direction. I watched "What Makes You Beautiful" again yesterday and cringed my way through the stock images of beach grass and capris and awkward attempts at seductive looks into the distance. I wonder how I would have thought about One Direction had I found them in college. We often forgive the imperfect things we loved from our childhood out of loyalty to our past selves. Because in all the most cliché ways possible, I *have* begun to love myself and how I choose to love others; and if that's what One Direction's music and bandhood has ultimately done for me, then I'm not sure what's so wrong about that.

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I'm not bothered by sex because I've never associated sex as something that's done, and always with something that you become. Sex was never an act; sex was the twenty minutes I was missing that I never really understood or wanted to understand, but that I thought I needed to become the person I wanted to be. Sex was knowing and understanding and connecting with women. Sex was knowing and understanding and connecting with men. With anyone, really. Sex has never been about other people, and has always been about myself.

So when I think about the present, I think about all the sex I won't have, and all the boys and men and people I'll love and lose because of it. I'd like to live a dirty, passionate, empty life. With cold air that wakes me up from the inside out. Music from my hollow chest. A love song, a melody. Summer in the daylight.



## Requiem for a Louis

The stage glows from red and umber lights. As the camera shakes and jostles back and forth<sup>1</sup>, a fan zooms their cellphone to focus on Harry Styles onstage at a One Direction concert in Auckland, New Zealand. The boys are frozen. Harry is in the middle of his emotional solo, right at the end of the bridge of “What Makes You Beautiful.”

Harry in the middle, in the front; Liam and Zayn right behind him in the second row; Niall and Louis in the last row. Louis Tomlinson stands in the back in a crisp white shirt and turquoise blue trousers the color of Niall’s sweater. He watches Harry in the waves of voices. Each boy stands solemnly in formation. When Louis steps forward, the rest of the band stands still.

Louis reaches forward. He pulls Harry’s pants down in front of everyone. The crowd screams, whether for the pantsing, or just screaming for screaming’s sake. The bridge finishes and the boys break from formation in an explosion of color. Louis moves off screen. He fades into the red and umber.

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For every artist that withstands the test of time, there are thousands more that are forgettable. It’s unspoken for fear of hurting others, but there *are* artists who are more successful, more *something* than another artist. If visibility is success, then some artists win more, and some

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<sup>1</sup> “Louis pulls down harry’s pants at One Directions auckland concert” via Youtube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8yuMolPiSk>

artists lose more. That loss doesn't just disappear. Part of our lives as artists is to see success come to others, no matter how much our own art has grown, no matter how more or less deserving that other artist is of the success. And it's unfair, and it's cruel, and it's life, and it's not going to change in one generation of people just *saying* that it's wrong.

And that doesn't make someone more or less of a person; we are more than the dollars associated to our names. We are more than our ability to produce for a society. And you *still* feel it in your bones when you know that you're less than in the eyes of someone else and the eyes of the audience you want to access. You know when you're the loser. The hurt is still real.

I am an artist; I call myself a writer. I would call myself a novice writer at the beginning of her career. Maybe talented, but unpolished and unpracticed, and maybe ready to move forward with her career, but not entirely. So what happens if I continue to make art, and what happens if I fail and continue to fail? What am I supposed to do, and how am I supposed to feel about that loss? I make art for myself, yes, but I also make art to have it be shared. And so I worry about my art having no value to an audience; and I worry about my art being forgettable.

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From the very beginning, Louis was my least favorite member of One Direction. There was something forced about the way he moved through the world.

Harry and Zayn might not have been the most confident people individually, but they were the most talented. They had a presence when you walked in the room because you knew that the things that would come out of their mouths would be better than what everyone else said.

That creates a kind of confidence eventually, even if the audience doesn't see it at first. Liam was always the most put together. He was the one who always knew what to say and how to say it; he was the steady hand of the group, guiding everyone in the right direction even when they didn't realize it was Liam controlling the room. Niall was the most open of the five; happy, smiley, vulnerable, naive, soft. He was the one people were sensitive about. Whenever people would say Niall was the weakest link of the group, the dogs would be set loose. People would go to Niall's defense, because he was someone worthy of defending.

Louis was the outlier. I couldn't figure out what Louis added to the group, at least initially. The group would be answering an interview question and Louis would slide into frame and stand up. I'd roll my eyes, because I knew that Louis was going to do something strange in an attempt to be funny. Louis was the kid in the classroom that wasn't smart enough for the front, wasn't edgy enough for the kids in the back, so all he had to offer were the random jokes and punchlines he'd make in an effort to make people remember him. It wasn't funny; it was just sad.

Onstage, Louis stayed toward the back; his voice wasn't the strongest, so he naturally faded into the harmonies. Offstage, Louis found his way to the front quite naturally. Louis was performative and outrageous. His voice was the loudest—literally, metaphorically. His speaking voice had the most meat to it. Niall and Liam had airy voices that trilled and floated. Zayn and Harry had voices that lagged, with seductive drawls. Louis' was crisp and solid. He did character voices really well, too.

And because Louis was a little bit annoying, and vocally not as talented as the rest of the band, and a little bit hard to pin down, it was hard to know who he was; and in that band, not knowing who you were and how to communicate that to the fans was almost a death wish,



because if the fans had no place for you and the fans had no name for you, then your role in the band was essentially worthless. If every member is supposed to bring something different to the table, no one could ever figure out what exactly Louis was bringing. With the other boys, it was easy to tell who was playing what role in the band. But there was no consistency with Louis. You could never get a sense of who Louis was trying to be. He was trying to be everyone.

Which I guess is what made him forgettable.

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When you go back in time to look for One Direction's original audition tapes for the 2011 British *X-Factor*, Niall, Harry, Zayn, and Liam all have recordings that last for minutes. Which doesn't sound like much, but Louis' audition tape lasts thirty seconds<sup>2</sup>. No backstory, no emotional sob story. His song, "Hey There Delilah," is short and unimpressive. His voice is sharp. I'm not sure why, but the judges say their yeses.

Niall, Harry, Liam, and Zayn have unpolished, but rich and varied voices. The few extra seconds we get to see of them is an investment in potential. It's an indicator to the audience, to make sure they pay attention to these particular people, at least that's the way I've always interpreted it.

I'm not sure what Louis' audition tape indicates, then. In the video, he walks onto the stage in a light cardigan and tie; just fashionable enough. His voice warbles a little bit (hell, I'd be nervous too). The cuts are quick and to the point. The tape wouldn't have been memorable had he not been grouped with the other boys of One Direction. There are probably hundreds

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<sup>2</sup> "Remember One Direction? All 5 Auditions X Factor UK" via Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw4r\\_gNWesE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw4r_gNWesE) (9:27-9:57)

upon thousands of tapes like Louis' that have never been immortalized on Youtube. But *this* video has over four million views.

By design, Louis' audition tape was ordinary, not unique enough to have a memorable backstory, not bad enough to be cut in the first place, but good enough to skate forward, undetected. But not good enough to have a unique identity and niche developed from the beginning; and it shows when the band is formed; when the live *X-Factor* shows began, one of the promotional efforts pushed was to have each individual and group contestant create video diaries every week, where they'd answer fan questions and give exclusive behind the scenes info about the shows. In the band's second diary<sup>3</sup>(1:07-3:41), Louis reads a fan question: "What roles do people play in the band?" He points to Liam. Louis looks to the camera, eyebrows raised and says that Liam is the smart one: Harry is the flirt: Zayn is vain: Niall is the funny one. He pauses, though, hesitant to name himself. He's faced away from the camera, but you can tell that he's unsure of what to name himself. His hand hovers in the air and he looks to the boys. Louis' the leader, Harry says. That's the one that's left, so that's the one that Louis is. He half smiles while Zayn cackles in the background. That's the only one that's left.

In the very first diary<sup>4</sup> (0:00-1:06), Louis sits quietly in the second row on the steps of the *X-Factor* palace. He reaches forward to plop his hands on Liam's shoulders and tossle Harry's hair while they talk. He's quiet. He reaches forward again, leaning toward the camera.

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<sup>3</sup> "All of the One Direction X-Factor Video Diaries!" via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-50PuPIB9A> (1:07-3:41)

<sup>4</sup> "All of the One Direction X-Factor Video Diaries!" via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-50PuPIB9A> (0:00-1:06)

He peers through; in my imagination, he's searching for something, or someone. Maybe someone to listen to him and remember who he is. Maybe it's a prayer that he'll find a name within this band of boys.

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Because it's 2018 and because being an artist is hard, in my writing classes I'm told that personal branding on social media is important to access my audience. But social media and *personal branding* is the opposite of art, right? To resist categorization is to make something new and explore new perspectives. To make art is to challenge the status quo, right? No one likes to be stereotyped or pigeonholed into one thing. The artist's instinct is to defy labels and branding and making art just to appeal to the masses.

But that's not how the world still works. Because yes, in a perfect world we *wouldn't* stereotype and we *wouldn't* place people and art into boxes. But naming and categorization is essential to communication; would it be possible to find or access information if we didn't categorize to *some* extent? There's not enough hours in the day to remove the labels of *every* stereotype in the world.

No one likes being branded, but that's what we do, and that's the easiest way to have people know your name. People who have easily identifiable aesthetics and personalities are more easy to categorize, and have an easier time accessing a specific audience with specific needs. Harry is the flirt; after One Direction breaks up in 2016, his solo music is sultry and smooth. Zayn is vain: he's the style icon on the cover of Vogue with his fashion model girlfriend. His music is edgy, experimental, R&B-esque. Niall is the funny one; acoustic guitars, sweet and



soft. Liam is the smart one; beyond solo music, he's producing, directing, and leading multiple music companies.

If I was a song, I would be something with lots of kettle drums and heart-swelling chords, like a song you'd play on a road trip with your friends after you've just graduated high school. If I was a genre of music I'd be the quirky indie pop songs that'd come up on your Spotify Discover playlist that you like listening to because it's just weird enough to be interesting, but familiar enough to be unintimidating. It's weird that I can so easily reduce my personality to the barest, most minimal elements, but what is my other option? If I don't know how my self can be of use to an audience, then how will I know if my art has any value to anyone other than myself? If I don't present my personhood and art as something relatable and identifiable, will anyone be able to find me? It's easy to tell kids that "fitting in" is futile and that people aren't going to care about that external kind of stuff in the future. But does it really? Maybe it becomes less general: "fitting in" with everyone is impossible. But "fitting in" with the crowd you *do* want to be associated with? What if I *want* to be called an artist by someone other than myself? What if I *want* my art to be shared and to be valued by an audience? Even as an adult, I still feel that pressure to be likable.

I think I give artists too hard of a time for falling into the rhythms of "what they used to be famous for doing" or for selling out and succumbing to capitalism. Pretending to know exactly who you are, and how you're going to present yourself, is to your benefit in reaching an audience. Even when I feel my body cringing and tightening because of it, I know how to wrap myself up into a little box on Twitter, one color scheme on Instagram, one article on Facebook, because I know exactly the type of people who will see it, and I know which people will engage,

and that's the only way I've figured out how to get people to look at the art I've made. I think it's easier to be consistent with the image of what you put out to the world. It makes it easier for other people to connect to you, because the roads to connection are paved and clear.

Louis never made it easy for us, though, to get to him. Not like the rest of the band. Louis takes a minute. He hesitates, which I guess would be his personal brand. No one knew what Louis was going to do next, during or post One Direction. And in some ways, I wonder if anyone else really cared.

He tried to, in some ways, to build those roads. But he didn't know himself and he was honest about that, and so he couldn't make the road clear. And if he was trying to make it clearer, I think he wasn't doing it well. At the least, I think he knew that he wasn't sure what he was doing.

He slows and hesitates making music in the wake of One Direction, in part because of his standing in the band<sup>5</sup>, in part because Louis has no idea who he is, and still has no idea who he is. In the quiet spaces, in the pauses and the stills off camera, Louis still doesn't know what he's doing or who he is, and he doesn't shy away from it, and that's why he's the one that people forget. That takes courage. I wish *I* was brave enough to be forgotten.

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In 2016, when One Direction announces their hiatus, Louis is the most resistant. He claims it's because that last year with the band he was finally figuring out who he was and how

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<sup>5</sup>“Louis Tomlinson: ‘Niall is lovely, Zayn has the voice, Harry is cool, Liam gets the crowd going... then there's me’” via *The Gaurdian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/jun/25/louis-tomlinson-one-direction-solo-album>

he fit in with the rest of the group. I have to imagine, though, that he also knew what no one else wanted to say because they didn't want to hurt him: Louis would fade. After five years of One Direction being together, Louis was the one who grew the most, who finally found his sound and voice. After feeling like a burden, after questioning why you, why me, *whywhywhy*, finally feeling the pieces click together, and feeling like it's all going to go away. And while the others would get record deals and movie roles and magazine covers once the band had broken up (which they did), Louis was afraid he was going to be forgotten<sup>6</sup>. And to be honest, I would be too.

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A few months ago a 2017 BuzzFeed article popped up on my Facebook feed, and it took me by surprise. "6 Extremely Sad Things Louis Tomlinson Just Said About Being in One Direction,"<sup>7</sup> summarizes a recent *Guardian* interview Louis had done reflecting on the aftermath of One Direction, and all the ways it failed him and all the ways it broke him.

"The others have always been..." he says. "Like Niall, for example. He's the most lovely guy in the world. Happy-go-lucky Irish, no sense of arrogance. And he's fearless. There are times I've thought: 'I'd have a bit of that.'" I wish I had a bit of that too; fearlessness. "Zayn, back in the day. He could relate to me on a nerves level. In the first year we were both the least confident. But Zayn has a fantastic voice and for him it was always about owning that." It's hard not to compare yourself to the friends who are naturally better than you; the bitterness churns and

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<sup>6</sup> "Louis Tomlinson: 'Niall is lovely, Zayn has the voice, Harry is cool, Liam gets the crowd going... then there's me'" via *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/jun/25/louis-tomlinson-one-direction-solo-album>

<sup>7</sup> "Six Extremely Sad Things Louis Tomlinson Just Said About Being in One Direction" via *Buzzfeed*: [https://www.buzzfeed.com/jenniferabidor/5-extremely-depressing-things-louis-tomlinson-just-said?utm\\_term=.yl5DDk9AD3#dHgLLXMkLN](https://www.buzzfeed.com/jenniferabidor/5-extremely-depressing-things-louis-tomlinson-just-said?utm_term=.yl5DDk9AD3#dHgLLXMkLN)



the jealousy is inevitable, and then you feel ten times worse because they're your friend and all you want to do is love them, but you can't. "Liam always had a good stage presence, same as Harry, they've both got that ownership.... And then there's me."

And there's me. The me who wishes I truly didn't care if people liked my writing or didn't like my writing. The me who wishes I could be one of those artists that was okay with being an artist forgotten, a happy artist, an artist who writes with bravery and without fear of her audience. An artist who says that out loud, who shouts it, who has confidence that the art is a worthy enough way of living without the validation of an audience.

I think the difference between me and Louis is not that our values are different. It's that Louis knows that he's less than and less brand-worthy to others, and he still makes the choice to make music for an audience. He still does it. With all the fear and all the worry, I don't think I'd be brave enough to make the same choice. The risk of failure is so heavy that it haunts me before I even take a step forward.

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We like to think that celebrities and artists belong to us, I think. Artists and celebrities are not people, we all know that, because the things that are for sale are their bodies of work, which are sometimes indistinguishable from their actual bodies. We buy the photos and the videos to watch their bodies to entertain us. We buy what comes from their minds and their mouths. We ask them to perform for us and do things we're normally not allowed to ask of other regular humans. Celebrities and artists are not people, so we don't have to treat them the same.

Louis belongs to me. Or at least, the idea of Louis belongs to *me*, and not just an individual *me* but a collective *me*, every fan, every individual that builds into one collective *me*, because part of being a celebrity and part of being an artist is to construct the potential of a relationship between the audience and the artist. I think artists want our audiences to latch onto our branded identities; because that's a part of the package. And then we're simultaneously afraid of what they'll do with that ownership, and wonder if with each piece of art sold if we're selling our souls too. Because once the audience possesses the image, there's nothing we can do to control the image. When people say I hate you, I own you, I hate you, get out, you're worthless and you aren't even a good singer, they aren't really speaking to a human being. They're speaking to the image they've bought and the relationship we have sold to them. It's hard to imagine what constitutes a body when the body is constantly being sold and picked and cut.

And then you end up hating yourself, because everything is dependent on how much other people love or hate you. The entire existence of a celebrity and a public personality balances on love and hatred. Even when you're loved, the feeling of hating yourself permeates and pushes you harder. The love comes from an image; so is the love ever actually real? Even when you're hated, people are still looking at you and people are still paying to see you. And so you keep going forward, no matter what people think of you. Whether or not you know yourself matters; it's all dependent on how other people know you. And in the end, it doesn't matter if you're loved or you're hated, because you're still getting attention. At least people know your name. At least people see you. Because then there are the artists and celebrities we feel apathetic

toward; not good enough to be loved, not bad enough to be hated, their images never distinct enough or swallowable for an audience to latch on to. And then they're forgotten.

Louis doesn't deserve this (the love, the hatred, the invisibility); artists don't deserve this; I don't deserve this. We are not inherently worthless. The fear and self-loathing is not deserved. Yet we choose to live within it. We either let it wash over us and pull us under the current until we can't make any art anymore. Or we move forward.

Louis hesitates. He pauses. But he steps forward. And I hope I can find the courage to follow him someday.

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Louis's interview with *The Guardian* was his first formal profile by himself, separate from the other boys. At the end of the article, the reader sees Louis chain smoking cigarettes. I imagine him relaxed, sitting back in his chair, maybe a little tense, but unwinding.

"I've enjoyed this," Louis tells the interviewer. "An opportunity to talk super openly. Not, y'know, answer questions about who my favourite superhero is. I don't feel I get that many chances."<sup>8</sup>

He drags, slow and steady. I can see the smoke pouring from his lips. Louis' new song is coming out soon. Despite his resistance to the band splitting up and the difficulty finding someone to collaborate with, Louis has music in the aftermath of One Direction.

If there was a camera, I see him looking away. He drags one more time.

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<sup>8</sup> "Louis Tomlinson: 'Niall is lovely, Zayn has the voice, Harry is cool, Liam gets the crowd going... then there's me'" via *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2017/jun/25/louis-tomlinson-one-direction-solo-album>